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# Promotion methods in foreign ministries

## Policy suggestions

- 1 Often, countries that do not have a promotion system are also countries that appoint a large proportion of political ambassadors; this demoralises their career diplomatic personnel, and undermines professionalism. It is thus useful to establish a proper method for promotion.
- 2 Seniority is a poor basis for promotion, because it neither takes into account performance, nor rewards merit. Countries that rely on seniority often tend not to have a mechanism to monitor performance. While assessment of merit may have flaws, it is vital to shift to performance-based promotions, again to strengthen professionalism.
- 3 Promotion methods are rooted in the tradition and ethos of each country. Despite this, it is useful for countries to identify best practices, and to look to the experience of other foreign ministries. About a dozen major Western countries hold annual meetings of their heads of human resources (HR) management, to share their experiences. It is useful for developing countries to consider such a method. This can also be attempted on a regional basis.

## Context

For any foreign ministry, the primary resource is its personnel whether executives at different levels or support staff. HR management is critical, often determining the ministry's effectiveness. Recruitment and training, selection for assignments, grievances redress, are all important, but within these, the promotion method stands out as a central pillar of HR management. What are the methods applied around the world? What are the best practices?

In many ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs), ideas borrowed from the corporate world are now applied to the public services. Often performance is measured against set objectives. Some foreign ministries apply 'balanced scorecards' and 'key performance indicators' usually as part of national, public-service-wide management modernisation. Senior officials sign 'contracts' to deliver set objectives. We see this in Western countries and some developing states. A common problem faced is that many key tasks in foreign ministries defy quantification or measurement.

Two concepts applied to promotions are 'merit' and 'seniority'. The latter is cast in stone, usually in terms of the date of entry into service; for those who enter together in a particular year, as a cohort or group, the initial ranking in the cohort may guide seniority; that ranking may undergo change as a result of subsequent tests or other actions. In contrast, 'merit' is always a changing element, often subjective and a matter of interpretation. A third method involves an examination of those candidates seeking promotion. Finally, in some countries no organised promotion system exists, partly because numbers are too small.

## Seniority-based promotion

**1. Japan:** The promotion system is partly seniority based, with all officials reaching an assured, specified position. All Group I officials reach the rank of director (broadly equivalent to a counselor in an embassy); The Expert Group reach the rank of first secretary, while the administrative category of staff are assured of the next lower rank of second secretary.<sup>1</sup> For Group I, the pyramid becomes sharp at the top; out of a cohort of 25 about 5 or 6 make it to the rank of director general, and a larger number, but not all, to the next rank below, deputy director general. Almost all members of Gaimusho's elite

<sup>1</sup> The 'expert' group is unique to the Japanese Gaimusho, consisting of language, area, or functional specialists, who are treated as second cousins to the main 'executive' branch, and move along a second track. Transfer from the expert to the executive track is rare, but as part of reform introduced in 2003, 25% of ambassador and consul general posts are reserved for them.

executive branch (Group I) manage to win promotion as ambassadors or consuls general before they retire.

There are no internal examinations for promotion, but as part of the 2003 reform, the annual assessment system is being modified to include comments by peers and by those that are supervised by the official – akin to the corporate world's '360° appraisal'.<sup>2</sup>

**2. India:** The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) promotes Foreign Service (IFS) officials on the basis of a 'batch' or cohort, typically taken up together. In the past, only those deemed unfit failed to get promotions to the top three grades (I to III), but in recent years, more selectivity has been applied, which means a significant number in each batch do not get promoted, say 30% or more.<sup>3</sup> There is no 'fast track', or out-of-turn promotion. The entire Indian civil service system deeply distrusts the merit principle, apprehensive that it may not be applied in a dispassionate manner.

One aspect of the MEA's method is unusual. If an official misses a promotion with the rest of that batch and is promoted one or two years later, the official gets back the original seniority. In the past, promotions to the top Grade I were given on 'compassion', as an act of favour, even when there was compelling evidence against such promotions. That is now changing.

One consequence is that in India, and to a slightly lesser extent in Japan, officials reach high ranks in their final years, just before retirement; there is no fast track. India partly compensates for this by using the ability criterion for nominating ambassadors to key countries, and not rank. Thus Grade III ambassadors may hold charge at key assignments, while those in Grade I serve at places of marginal importance (typically comfortable postings, and thus accepted).

'Deep selection' has sometimes been applied in India for the appointment of foreign secretary, the head of the Service. In 2005 and again in 2007, an entire batch was passed over and a foreign secretary selected from the next batch. That led to resentment, a few resignations, plus court cases – though Indian courts usually give short shrift to cases filed by the disgruntled.

## Merit-based promotion

The key challenge is always how to assess merit in a dispassionate and objective fashion.

**1. Singapore:** Annual appraisals follow sound HR practices, with officials offering their own estimate of the

<sup>2</sup> Rana KS (2007) *Asian Diplomacy: The Foreign Ministries of China, India, Japan, Singapore and Thailand*. DiploFoundation: Malta and Geneva.

<sup>3</sup> In India, these three top grades and the typical service period when the appointments are made are: secretary (31+ years), additional secretary (28 years), and joint secretary (17–18 years). Abroad, ambassadors are classified in three matching grades: I, II, and III.

performance goals accomplished, discussing these with the reporting officer, and a third level confirming the appraisal. Separate from this, the foreign ministry annually evaluates all officials, making a projection of the level that the official will reach after 5, 10, 15, 20, and 25 years; this is called the Current Evaluated Potential (CEP) and is handled by a review panel that includes a number of directors in the ministry, headed by the deputy secretary (Management); the results are not published. They consider the official's intelligence, ability, and performance delivery, and also their emotional quotient, to establish the 'helicopter quality'. A key element of realism: the numbers deemed worthy of promotion to high rank must match projected vacancies. This becomes the basis for promotions and career management. Borrowed from the oil multinational Shell, this method is applied to all Singapore public services to identify and groom high-flyers.<sup>4</sup> No other diplomatic service operates such an engineered fast-track. Others such as Australia, China, Germany, Thailand, the UK, and the USA, apply rigorous merit-based promotion, but without such a draconian mechanism.

Despite efforts, subjective elements cannot be eliminated. For instance, in the German Foreign Office state secretaries have typically served on the staff of powerful senior officials. In essence, elites perpetuate the elites.

**2. United States and Australia:** In the USA, an official seeking promotion to the 'senior foreign service' (i.e., the top four ranks), voluntarily opens a 'promotion window' and is thereafter assessed in a rigorous manner. The US State Department requires that once this window is opened, the official must be promoted within six years, or has to quit. A rationale for this tough method is that this promotion is only for those that seek it. Otherwise officers are rated annually and placed into annual competition for promotions up to the rank of FSO-1 (which is broadly counselor rank). There is no concept of a cohort in the US system. To its credit, despite a State Department that is the largest such entity in the world, with tight selection, some still obtain fast-track promotions. The key in all such systems is to win credibility and acceptance from stakeholders, including by those not promoted. Australia applies a similar method for promotion to senior ranks. One source describes the US process of regular promotion as follows:

*An example of a successful human resource performance management is the U.S. performance management plan, structured with annual work requirements agreed upon by the employee and the supervisor. This consists of two counseling sessions, and three performance narratives: first by the employee, then by the direct supervisor, and finally by the supervisor's senior. A review board reads the completed evaluation, looking for inadmissible content. After this process, the evaluation is sent to a performance review panel, where the evaluation is assessed against all other reviews of the same grade and*

<sup>4</sup> Singapore also has an elite 'Administrative Service', whose officials move in and out of different ministries, including the foreign ministry, and also hold diplomatic assignments. Key assignments, including that of permanent secretary in the MFA, are reserved for them.

career track. The employee's performance thus competes with that of peers, and promotions are given based on evidence that the employee is working at the next level (level to be promoted to), and the availability of funds. Statistics show that promotions can range from 9–20%, depending on the career track.<sup>5</sup>

**3. China and Germany:** Similarity in promotion is just one of other parallels that can be found in HR management in the foreign ministries of these two countries. This happens through a similarity of approach, and not via any attempt to learn from one another. Both the countries have large diplomatic services, and face similar problems in having to select the best in a way that gives high flyers a chance to move forward rapidly, without causing undue resentment among the larger number not promoted. This hinges on a reputation for objectivity and dispassionate selection. For the first eight to ten years, a cohort moves together in lockstep, with promotions coming as milestones based on years served. Thereafter, high selectivity kicks in, based on detailed assessment of the individual, and reports from superiors, from peers and from those that the individual supervises. This latter element is strong in China, less so in Germany. In China:

*A bidding system is used, open to anyone in the MFA, and subject to qualifying grades and years of experience. In an elaborate process 40% of marks are assigned in the basis of a written test; another 30% comes in a set of interviews, where five evaluators judge the responses by the candidate to hypothetical situations, to identify the three best candidates (whose inter se ranking is not disclosed). Then for a week, the names of the three are put up for comment by anyone in the MFA, through signed statements or even anonymous observations; 30% of the marks are assigned on this basis. All promotions are subject to ratification by the Minister.<sup>6</sup>*

One consequence: competent young officials rise fast to high rank; many ambassadors are under 40. The best reach the rank of vice minister in China, and state secretary in Germany, in their early 50s. Singapore ensures a fixed tenure for its deputy secretaries and permanent secretaries, which means that the high flyers have to retire from these top jobs while they are in their early or mid-50s; they are re-employed in other top assignments, as CEOs of state enterprises or as heads of official entities; that ensures a flow of young talent into top mainstream jobs.

## Exam method

Some MFAs may combine the merit test with an exam. Many countries require that prior to promotion, candidates must attend training courses, for example India, Indonesia, and Mexico, among others. In India,

<sup>5</sup> This description was provided by a participant in one of the author's distance learning courses; the author has no independent corroboration for its accuracy.

<sup>6</sup> Rana KS (2007) *Asian Diplomacy: The Foreign Ministries of China, India, Japan, Singapore and Thailand*. DiploFoundation: Malta and Geneva.

across the civil service, promotion from director to joint secretary and from that level to additional secretary (in international terms, counselor to minister and from that to DG level), a training course must be crossed. The Indian MEA conducts these courses at a management institute at Hyderabad and at the Foreign Service Institute in Delhi. Indonesia mandates a four-month training course for promotion to first secretary and counselor.

**1. United Kingdom:** The British FCO now uses a method that has no equivalent, which combines training and promotion assessment, for officials seeking to move above the rank of second secretary, right up to the rank of counselor, through Assessment and Development Centers (ADC).<sup>7</sup> In an intensive process, six candidates are examined by up to six assessors (with others brought in to 'enact scenarios') over one week. Typically only about 25% of the candidates are promoted.

*[...] an officer can apply with just two years' experience in their current grade, provided they have support from a senior manager ... ADCs are residential and consist of a series of written exercises, interactive exercises (some with role-players) and a competence-based interview... Candidates ... arrive at the ADC venue on Sunday evening for a briefing on what to expect. They are also given background reading to their exercises. Candidates begin the exercises on the Monday morning. FCO/external consultant assessors and role-play actors arrive at the same time. As candidates perform the written exercises they may be interrupted to undertake their interactive exercises. The candidates finish their exercises on Tuesday ... Each candidate has a lead FCO assessor who reviews the body of evidence acquired on their candidate at the end of the ADC... These findings are then presented to the rest of the assessor group at an integration meeting facilitated by the quality controller. This ensures an objective process, where assessors reach consensus that the evidence and marks given are an accurate assessment of a candidate's performance ... candidates meet with their lead assessors and one of the external consultants in London for feedback interviews, lasting approximately 1 hour 30 minutes. Having had their performances and behaviour scrutinised and analysed by five/six assessors, including two professional development consultants, the final report and feedback interview provide candidates with arguably the clearest insight into their strengths/weaknesses they have ever received.<sup>8</sup>*

**2. Mexico:** Promotion takes place on the basis of an exam conducted at the Secretariat for Foreign Affairs. The exam is held in Mexico and candidates posted overseas have to travel at their own cost. It is a tough exam, but actual promotion hinges on the number of vacancies available, which sometimes leaves candidates rather dissatisfied. The fact that about 60% of the ambassador rank appointments are political, impacts on the availability of promotion slots.

<sup>7</sup> This method went into effect in the early 2000s; as noted in Brian Barder's *What Diplomats Do* (2014), before the ADC process, promotions to the rank of first secretary were 'semi-automatic'.

<sup>8</sup> The extracts are from a document provided very kindly to the author by the British FCO.

**3. Brazil, Chile, and Peru:** Those seeking promotion to the rank of ambassador have to write what amounts to a doctoral dissertation. Some may wonder how this connects with the modern work of diplomacy, while other are of the view that this is good training to develop analytical and presentation skills. Brazil now seems to apply a 'fast track' and had a secretary-general at Itamaraty who was barely 55.

### Ad hoc promotions

In many small and even medium-sized states, there is no stipulated promotion method. That produces arbitrary actions with promotions taking place when vacancies come up or for other reasons.

This situation is compounded in countries where the bulk of senior appointments, especially of ambassadors, are from outside the career track. Often these are the same countries where no promotion method exists. This produces pervasive demoralisation, and some hemorrhage of top-grade talent. Many forget that international organisations and other entities are in search of quality talent, and competent professionals do have other career options. The diplomatic machinery cannot reach its potential, which is a serious disservice to the country and its foreign policy delivery.

A linked issue is that in some countries there is no distinct foreign service. Officials are either rotated regularly between the home and foreign services, or the latter are treated as separate from the home services, but with no legislative cover or specific regulations governing the foreign ministry. Consequently, countries such as the Maldives and the Bahamas are currently exploring parliamentary legislation to give a separate character to their foreign service.

### MFA postings policy

It may be useful to take a quick look at a related issue: how officials are selected for postings. Some trends:

Many foreign ministries categorise overseas locations in terms of living conditions (including physical security),

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and place them in three or five clusters, say ranked from A+ to C-. The goal is to ensure that every official moves across the spectrum; for example, someone who has served in a hardship post (say Baghdad or Kabul or Tripoli) is next sent to a comfortable station. If we replace a letter grading with a numerical one, we can show the average 'postings profile' of each official – useful to show the degree of fairness or equity.

A fair number of MFAs apply a 'cycle' arrangement, which ensures that officials are either sent on two foreign assignments before heading back to headquarters (i.e., the MFA), or do such postings in direct rotation, one abroad followed by a home assignment; this usually depends on the proportion between officials at headquarters and at embassies. Naturally, an open and predictable system is always preferable.

Some employ a bidding system: all assignments coming up in a block of six months are announced, and officials are invited to bid for these. The Indian MEA tried this out in the mid-1990s and found it worked very well. For example, it became clear that not everyone wanted to pursue A+ postings; some preferred to serve in relatively more difficult neighbouring locations for personal reasons (e.g. easy access to elderly parents), or preferred to reserve their claim to A+ posts when their children could benefit from good university education.

### Conclusion

HR management needs moral character and a sense that the system is fair. In MFAs this is tied with a perception that foreign policy is coherent and well administered.

It is a small wonder that countries as different as the USA, the UK, Germany, France, and China manage to handle rigorous selectivity within their large numbers in their diplomatic services, without any discernible demoralisation among those not promoted. The US State Department tells new recruits that they should not expect to gain promotion to ambassador rank as a matter of course.

Morale is a core issue in any diplomatic service. In small MFAs, when political appointees usurp ambassador appointments, how can the best officials be retained, or motivated to do their best?

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